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WASHINGTON-The sudden death of Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov on December 21 represents an extraordinary opportunity for the United States to encourage desperately needed human rights reforms, respect for the rule of law, and the conduct of fully free and fair elections in the strategic Central Asian republic, one of the world's most repressive states. Such improvements are vital to the protection of human rights and for Turkmenistan's long-term stability.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal agency, recommends that the U.S. government insist that the transitional leadership in Turkmenistan act immediately to reverse Niyazov's gross abuses of human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. Since 2000, the Commission has called for Turkmenistan to be designated a Country of Particular Concern by the Department of State due to the Turkmenistan government's consistent and flagrant disregard of its commitments with respect to freedom of religion or belief.

The United States should encourage the new government of Turkmenistan to end Niyazov's personality cult, which had reached the dimensions of a state-imposed religion; halt the government's interference with, and excessive control over, religious activities and organizations; and bring the country's religion law into conformity with Turkmenistan's Constitution and its international legal commitments, particularly Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Commission calls on the White House and the Senate to move quickly to send a new U.S. ambassador to Turkmenistan to work with the new Turkmen authorities as they undertake a thorough reform of current laws and practices that undermine freedom of religion and related human rights.

The excesses of the Turkmenistan government under President Niyazov have been widely condemned in UN resolutions and by independent treaty monitoring bodies and experts. In October 2006, the UN Secretary General reported to the General Assembly that "gross and systematic violation of human rights continued ... notwithstanding the gestures made by the [Turkmenistan] government.

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government urge the new authorities in Turkmenistan to undertake the following critical reforms with regard to ensuring human rights, democracy, and the rule of law:

- Dismantle the personality cult of former President Niyazov, eliminate the requirement that the Rukhnama-a book of Niyazov's "spiritual thoughts"-be quoted and displayed in mosques, and drop the Rukhnama from the curricula;
- Conduct fully free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections;
- Immediately put an end to the country's practices that repress freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. These changes include (1) ending harassment and deportation of religious leaders; (2) halting unjust arrest, detention, imprisonment, torture, and residential and workplace intimidation of religious leaders and their adherents; (3) releasing immediately and unconditionally any persons who have been detained solely because of their religious beliefs, practices, or choice of religious association, including Nazrullah ibn Ibadullah, the country's former chief mufti; and (4) investigating all cases of reported harassment, raids, and destruction of houses of worship, and holding those responsible to account.
- Adopt thorough reform of the country's policies toward religion, including ending state interference in the selection, training, and management of religious communities, including those of Sunni and Shia Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church, and Protestant and other minority communities, and ensure freedom of religion or belief for every individual; dropping imprisonment or fines of individuals who engage in unregistered religious activities; allowing children to receive religious education; allowing the publication and distribution of religious literature inside Turkmenistan; and permitting freedom of movement for individuals, including members of all religious communities.
- Invite the 10 experts of the UN Special Procedures on Human Rights, in response to their longstanding requests for visits, and answer the outstanding communications they have sent regarding specific alleged violations. These experts include the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as special procedures (rapporteurs, working groups, etc.) on Freedom of Expression; Torture; Extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Independence of the Judiciary; the Right to Education; Right to Health; Internally Displaced Persons; Human Rights Defenders; and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. In addition, invite representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE's) Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Turkmenistan should provide the full and necessary conditions for such visits.

The Commission further recommends that, in the longer term, the U.S. government conduct a full review and evaluation of its international programs to ensure that the advancement and promotion of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Turkmenistan including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief is a top strategic policy priority. Among the elements that could be adopted or expanded are the following:

- Increase radio, Internet, and other broadcasts of objective news and information, including educational topics, human rights, freedom of religion, and tolerance;
- Develop programs to encourage effective civil society groups that protect human rights and promote religious freedom;
- Increase exchange programs, including civil society leaders, students, and others concerned with human rights;
- Expand dissemination of information about human rights and democratic freedoms, including through “American corner” reading rooms in various regions;
- Expand “train-the-trainer” legal assistance programs for representatives of religious communities to act as legal advisers in the registration process;
- Specify freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as a grants category and area of activity in the Democracy and Conflict Mitigation program of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Democracy Commission Small Grants program administered by the U.S. Embassy.

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government also support the following actions in international bodies with regard to Turkmenistan:

- Expand the activities of the OSCE Center in Ashgabat, particularly in regard to human rights, tolerance, and freedom of religion or belief, including programs with local schools, universities and non-governmental organizations. The Commission welcomes the recent statement by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office to the new leadership in Turkmenistan offering assistance.
- Encourage the new government of Turkmenistan to abide by the numerous recommendations of the October 2006 Report of the UN Secretary General on the Situation of Human Rights in Turkmenistan, and the conclusions of the independent treaty bodies to which Turkmenistan has formally reported.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

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